Chapter 4

Drones and Policy Objectives

American combat drones have been used extensively to target militants and terrorists in countries such as Pakistan and Somalia. Less frequently noticed is that they have also been employed for other purposes. As we discussed in the first chapter, the United States used drones during the civil war in Libya in 2011. At the time, there were no terrorist organizations there that seriously threatened the United States. Instead, the goal of the intervention was to assist the rebels seeking to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi. American officials believed that without decisive action on their part, the Gaddafi regime was likely to massacre civilians, and they cooperated with other countries to weaken Gaddafi’s forces and to impose a no-fly zone.1 Drone strikes in the war in Afghanistan have been used to target armed groups, such as the Taliban, that threaten American ground troops in the country.2 But an additional goal of such strikes has been to bolster the Afghan government in its struggle with the Taliban. In Libya, then, drones were used to bring about regime change and prevent a humanitarian disaster; in Afghanistan, they were used to prevent the violent overthrow of an ally. This indicates that drones can play an important role in a broad range of missions beyond the targeted killings with which they are most commonly associated.

Combat drones have not been employed in conventional conflicts with states and are currently less suited for this role because of their vulnerability to enemy aircraft and air defense systems.3 Nevertheless, the United States is investing heavily in developing drones that could penetrate opponents’ air defense and launch attacks against ground targets or ships.4 While drones have been used most extensively to counter terrorist groups,
there have already been cases where they have been employed to achieve other political objectives, and in the near future the range of operations that drones could undertake may expand rapidly as their technological capabilities are developed further. In this chapter, we investigate if and how the type of mission, or principal policy objective, influences public support for military action when drones are employed.

We also consider how policy objectives shape Americans’ willingness to bear losses. Casualty aversion is generally described as constraining uses of force and forming a barrier against the initiation of wars, often without any discussion of whether the type of war in question will influence public support. Those who discuss the possibility that drones may lower inhibitions against initiating wars generally do not account for the many different reasons why wars are waged and how these reasons may affect the public’s willingness to fight and sustain casualties. This leads critics of drone warfare to characterize the technology as increasing the incidence of wars or lowering inhibitions against fighting as though the objectives being pursued have no influence on public opinion. This chapter demonstrates that public support for wars is a complex phenomenon, and that other considerations aside from the anticipated numbers of military casualties can influence people’s support for fighting. Drones may help to avoid the antiwar sentiment generated by casualty aversion, but this has limited influence on the overall levels of support for fighting when important policy objectives are at stake.

Distinguishing between types of wars is also essential for understanding the political, moral, and legal implications of drone use. All wars are not equal. One war might be seen as less morally and legally justified than another, and the desirability of the political goals being pursued may vary. Critics of drone warfare tend to imply that all efforts should be made to avoid war under all circumstances and that any effect drones have on facilitating combat is undesirable. Conversely, those who support drone warfare tend to emphasize drones’ ability to conduct selective attacks while downplaying the possibility that those attacks may lead to more aggressive wars. In both cases there is little attention to the underlying reasons for fighting or how the justification for war may change depending on the circumstances. It is not enough to know whether drones make it easier to initiate wars; we must know whether they make it easier to initiate just or unjust wars in particular.

Wars should usually be avoided, but they are sometimes necessary, and
it is therefore best to adopt a more pragmatic attitude when assessing the implications of drone warfare and the effects of casualty sensitivity more broadly. Judgments about whether inhibiting or enabling wars is good or bad must be made on a case-by-case basis with careful attention to the reasons for fighting and the availability of nonviolent alternatives. This shifts the moral and legal discussion of drone use away from the machines themselves and onto the people who will authorize drone strikes. Accepting that attacks are sometimes warranted makes it imperative to determine whether attitudes toward drone operations will be shaped by prudential calculations about when wars are necessary and justified, or by the ease of conducting attacks. If support for drone strikes is influenced by the value and legitimacy of the objective being pursued, then we should expect public opinion to manifest a fairly responsible attitude about drone use. On the other hand, if the public is sensitive to casualties but not to the reasons for fighting, then drones strikes could potentially achieve the same level of support regardless of whether there are good reasons for fighting.

We build on a large body of research that categorizes different types of wars in terms of their principal policy objective (PPO). PPOs can be grouped into four general types: counterterrorism, foreign policy restraint, internal political change, and humanitarian intervention. Theoretically, organizing conflicts in terms of PPOs provides a way of mapping how support for drone strikes is influenced by the kinds of conflicts in which drones could be used. Methodologically, the literature showing how PPOs influence support for wars involving ground forces and air strikes facilitates comparisons between our own research and previous studies exploring other influences on public opinion. We build on the insight that wars that are perceived as being more important for national security tend to receive higher levels of support. We expect that PPOs will affect the willingness to use drones and that support for them will be particularly strong for counterterrorism operations because of the prominence of terrorism as a security threat.

In this chapter, we contribute to existing work regarding PPOs to investigate two expectations, summarized in table 4.1. The first is that the pattern of greater support for drone strikes that we found in chapters 2 and 3 for counterterrorism operations is replicated for other PPOs. As we discuss below, this relationship is not straightforward; there are plausible reasons to think, for example, that pilot invulnerability in particular could make drones especially popular for less intensive military engage-
Drones and Support for the Use of Force

ments. The second conjecture is that the additional support for the use of force that materializes when drones are employed is actually the smallest for counterterrorism operations. In the contemporary era, terrorism is the most direct armed threat to the security of the United States. For this reason, we expect individuals to be more willing to incur costs, such as military casualties, to counter terrorism than they are to address other threats. The survey experiment that makes up the empirical section of the chapter finds strong support for the first conjecture, and less overwhelming but consistent support for the second. In the conclusion, we discuss some of the implications of these findings, including that drones appear to make all types of combat politically easier and thus could, at the margin, enable leaders to engage in more wars of more types in the future.

Drones and Principal Policy Objectives

A central criticism of drones is that the pilot invulnerability and selectivity they allow will lower inhibitions against initiating wars. Most of the commentators who raise this concern do so without considering how different types of PPOs could influence public opinion. Their work implies that there should be a consistent pattern of drones circumventing limits on support for the use of force, and therefore producing greater willingness to wage wars compared to when piloted aircraft or ground forces are used, regardless of the reasons for fighting. If drone warfare indeed renders the population complacent and disengaged, then the PPO may not matter at all, since a disengaged public would be indifferent whatever the circumstances surrounding an operation. Our findings across multiple experiments challenge the assumption that drones produce an acquiescent and uncritical citizenry and lead us to suggest that a more plausible expectation: that the pattern of greater support for drone strikes than other types of force persist across military operations in pursuit of different PPOs.

TABLE 4.1. Principal Policy Objective Expectations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation 4.1:</th>
<th>Individuals will express greater support for prospective military missions employing drones compared to other attack types for all principal policy objectives.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expectation 4.2:</td>
<td>Individuals will express greater support for attack types that place military personnel at risk when the principal policy objective represents a more important national interest.</td>
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this is the case, then we would expect to see that although variation in PPOs influences support for war, pilot invulnerability and selectivity will guarantee that drones are consistently preferred over alternative methods of attack that could put soldiers at risk.

Others suggest that the effects of drones on support for military action should vary across PPOs. Brunstetter and Braun are among the few commentators who have considered the effects that drones might have on different types of military operations. They argue that drones will not simply increase the incidence of wars, but rather decrease the likelihood of major wars while increasing the likelihood of small wars. Although their distinction between major and small wars is not identical to the four types of PPOs, their argument does suggest that the characteristics of the conflict will alter how drones influence public opinion. Their reasoning is that drone use will avert large wars by allowing states to engage in small attacks in pursuit of limited objectives and without endangering their military personnel. Such attacks would be less apt to escalate into major conflicts than attacks involving human soldiers because, due to pilot invulnerability, the attacks may not cause any casualties. By contrast, Brunstetter and Braun contend that small wars will become more frequent because policymakers and military elites will be more tempted to use force when they can wage risk-free asymmetric wars. This is a plausible expectation, but the authors do not substantiate it with empirical findings, so more work needs to be done to test their hypothesis.

According to Brunstetter and Braun, the absence of casualty aversion plays an important role in enabling small wars to take place. Public opinion is less likely to inhibit these types of wars when drones are involved than when soldiers may be killed or wounded. This means that casualty aversion could be avoided entirely in small wars, even though it would continue to act as a barrier against initiating more destructive major wars. Although Brunstetter and Braun do not consider how support for drone strikes may interact with differences in PPOs, their argument provides a basis for thinking that the public will be less likely to favor drone strikes when a PPO involves the risk of escalation into a conventional war, as it might in foreign policy restraint and internal political change missions, than when a PPO would typically lead to a small war, as in the case of counterterrorism operations and humanitarian interventions.

Zack Beauchamp and Julian Savulescu agree that pilot invulnerability could make it easier for states armed with drones to wage wars, yet
they reach conclusions about the desirability of this that differ from most other commentators engaged in the debate. As they see it, “the bug is in fact a feature” because lowering the threshold for war means that “drones have the potential to significantly improve the practice of humanitarian intervention.”8 It is difficult to cultivate public support for humanitarian interventions because they can have high costs and little or no clear material payoff for the intervening state. Ideally, humanitarian interventions should not be conducted to benefit the intervening country, as this might compromise the moral grounds for intervention and encourage aggression under the pretext of humanitarianism. But as Beauchamp and Savulescu correctly point out, such benevolent missions are unlikely to be undertaken unless they are relatively cheap, and they will only be cheap if they can be fought using military hardware that can virtually guarantee that soldiers will not be killed or wounded. Thus, Beauchamp and Savulescu suggest that drones are apt to make the biggest difference in the levels of support for war during humanitarian interventions that would be unpopular if they required the use of ground forces.

As these studies indicate, opinions are divided on the issue of how support for war may be affected by the type of war being considered as well as in their assessments of whether an increased willingness to fight is dangerous or morally advantageous. Testing expectation 4.1 will also allow us to evaluate the alternative relationships between drones and PPOs developed by Brunstetter and Braun and by Beauchamp and Savulescu. We can also move beyond these specific predictions to understand how the availability of drones will impact public support for other kinds of operations.

Principal Policy Objectives in American Military Operations

Early work on PPOs distinguished between wars aimed at foreign policy restraint and wars for internal political change. This distinction was made to demarcate conflicts that could have different degrees of perceived importance for national security.9 States wage wars for foreign policy restraint when their goal is to prevent an opponent from acting aggressively, either by fighting in self-defense or in defense of an ally. Bruce Jentleson, who pioneered the study of PPOs, was careful to explain that this does not include preventive operations aimed at deterring future aggression; there must be a real and active threat that makes war a matter of national inter-
est. By contrast, a war involving internal political change seeks to transform the domestic power structure or institutions of another state. Such wars tend to have a more pre-emptive character since there is no immediate threat to be countered but rather the presence of some more distant or indirect national security interest.

Using polling data, Jentleson shows that foreign policy restraint tends to have much higher levels of support than internal political change. This trend is particularly strong when it comes to judging a prospective military venture when the numbers of casualties and potential for success are uncertain. Jentleson reaches an optimistic conclusion based on these results: that the American public will prudently support wars against aggressive states while still being reluctant to condone aggressive or unnecessary wars. This distinction between foreign policy restraint and internal political change highlights an important difference in the degrees to which a war may be considered justified. Foreign policy restraint has a more defensive character that would more easily satisfy the demands of just war theory and international humanitarian law. Internal political change is not necessarily aggressive, yet it is more difficult to justify because it goes beyond defensive war and pre-emptive war against imminent threats to take on the character of preventive war against threats that may not actually materialize. Work on PPOs was cast as an intervention in an ongoing debate over what forces drive policy preferences. According to the “Almond-Lippmann consensus” that prevailed in the years following the Second World War, the American public is mercurial, lacking clear policy preferences and unable to rigorously evaluate potential courses of action. The prudential considerations at work in analyses of PPOs contrasted with this view, showing that people are capable of carefully evaluating prospective actions and making consistent judgments about these.

Subsequent research by Jentleson and Britton expanded the PPO categorization to include humanitarian intervention, which they define as missions to provide emergency support for people who are suffering from a humanitarian disaster. Interventions may be aimed at not only providing protection against acts of political violence but also environmental catastrophes. Jentleson and Britton argue that support for humanitarian interventions tends to fall somewhere between foreign policy restraint and internal political change. Humanitarian interventions have lower levels of support than the former because they are not seen as being as necessary for the protection of national security, but they are more popular than
internal political change missions that lack the moral status of humanitarian operations.

Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler generally substantiate Jentleson and Britton’s findings, especially the conclusion that Americans make reasoned calculations about when to support war. They contend that Americans may lack detailed knowledge of what is at stake in foreign conflicts as well as knowledge of the contested areas, but that they are nevertheless capable of weighing the costs and benefits of military action when these are presented to them. As they put it, “[t]he public may not be very good at quiz bowl questions about international current events, but the public as a whole has stable and reasonable opinions that change in response to changes in the real world.” They challenge what they see as a misconception that members of the public cannot make reasoned decisions when they have little contextual information, and contend that Americans are good at weighing the immediate costs and benefits that are presented when politicians make the case for war.

Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler also update the study of PPOs by pointing out the importance of including counterterrorism operations as a new form of foreign policy restraint, and they find that this type of mission receives the highest levels of support, followed by humanitarian intervention, and then internal political change. However, they argue that this ranking should not be treated as a fixed characteristic of public opinion. As they see it, the emergence of different types of threats could cause the relative interest in the PPOs to change. They speculate that policymakers’ framing of threats could also influence the ordering of support for PPOs. This is a critical insight. It indicates that the ranking of PPOs is not immutable but rather a reflection of the security context and more general patterns in the public’s outlook toward potential threats. We may therefore expect to see shifts in PPOs popularity over time as threats and preferences change.

Some have challenged these findings, offering other explanations for variations in public support for past conflicts. One plausible alternative explanation is that attitudes are not responsive to the PPOs themselves but rather to the rhetorical framing of conflicts in terms of PPOs. By this account, some informed members of the public may be influenced by the conflict objectives while others who are less concerned with matters of foreign policy will respond to how elites justify military operations and how clearly they articulate the reasons for fighting. This means that “[w]hile well-informed citizens are likely to evaluate the policy for what it
is, a majority of Americans will buy what the White House sells them.”

This exposes the critical difference between how a conflict is framed and the real reasons why it is being waged, raising the possibility that conflicts can be misrepresented in an effort to make the case for war. Nevertheless, this finding substantiates the conclusion that PPOs are important to the public by showing that they influence support for war regardless of whether the PPOs are genuine or misrepresented.

A central finding in work on PPOs, then, is that opinions about the importance of a conflict accounts for differing levels of support and that perceptions may change over time, either as a consequence of real shifts in national priorities or in response to elite rhetoric. If this is the case, then we should expect variation in which PPOs are supported over time as the security landscape shifts and new threats emerge. Such shifts have occurred over the course of research on the relationship between PPOs and public opinion. When Jentleson first tested his theory, the United States was engaged in its Cold War mission of containing Soviet influence, a task that made foreign policy restraint appear to be an important objective even when acts of aggression where carried out against other countries. Jentleson and Britton analyzed support for humanitarian interventions in their follow-up research because of the United States’ post–Cold War involvement in small wars that were meant to protect marginalized groups or to stabilize conflict zones.

In the current era, we expect that the three other PPOs will have declined in importance relative to counterterrorism operations. The threat of terrorism, first from al Qaeda, then from Islamic State, has defined US security policy throughout the period when combat drones have been employed. The link between this PPO and drone strikes is so strong that even studies making inferences about future drone operations tend to assume that these will take place in a counterterrorism context. And many of the moral concerns that critics direct against drones apply not so much to the machines themselves but to the ongoing practice of using these weapons platforms to strike at suspected terrorists who, lacking advanced military hardware of their own, are powerless to retaliate.

This is the logic behind our second expectation, which holds that the public will be more willing to countenance forms of military action that risk soldiers’ lives—such as air strikes and the use of ground troops—when the PPO is of central importance to the national interest. We base this on the insight that casualty aversion will form a barrier against certain types
of military operations and not others, and that the effects of casualty aversion will vary considerably depending on the mission. Mueller argues that casualty aversion and mission type are closely linked. He contends that the American public was fairly amenable to sending soldiers into foreign countries during the Cold War because this was seen as advancing the containment strategy that appeared to be vital to the country’s national security. Public support for those wars came not from the immediate objectives being pursued but from the overall goal of preventing a more serious threat from materializing, and the feeling of urgency surrounding those missions helped to maintain higher levels of support than would have been possible in costly wars that were seen as unimportant.

Smith reaches a similar conclusion. He argues that casualty aversion is affected by the extent to which a conflict advances national interests: “The explanation for the greater prominence of the casualty factor in the 1990s is simply that for democratic Western nations, most conflicts did not engage national interests at all deeply.” He describes humanitarian interventions like those in Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda as being particularly good examples of the difficulty of sustaining popular support for nonessential missions. In each case, there was not a strong justification for putting American soldiers at risk of being killed or wounded, as there had been during the Cold War. Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler show that perceptions of the importance of American military casualties in Iraq are influenced by the perceived necessity of the mission there, and in particular by the importance of Iraq as part of the War on Terror. “[W]e find that those who believe that the war in Iraq is the ‘central front’ in the war on terrorism are 10 percent more likely to tolerate 1,500 casualties than a respondent who believes that Iraq is a distraction from the war on terror.” This also indicates the importance of PPOs in general, since the disagreement between those who see a link between Iraq and the War on Terror and those who do not is a matter of whether the conflict is a counterterrorism operation or an internal political change.

Principal Policy Objective and Support for the Use of Force: Survey Experiments

Research on the reasons driving support for war typically looks at the influence of mission type on support for war using polling data collected before, during, and after actual conflicts. This provides an excellent per-
spective on how public opinion shifts in response to real events, yet it sometimes leaves unanswered questions when it comes to accounting for the causal mechanisms underlying those shifts. It is difficult to tell the extent to which opinion was influenced by the mission, by low casualty tolerance, or by some other factors. Experiments provide a way of more precisely determining the extent to which PPOs affect support for a war by isolating their influence and holding other considerations that might affect support for war constant. Experiments also allow us to vary the weapons and tactics used to achieve a PPO to determine its influence on public opinion relative to casualty tolerance.

To assess this chapter’s two expectations, we conducted an experiment based on hypothetical news stories. The news stories varied two elements (see the chapter appendix for the complete wording of each treatment as well as the questions that comprise the survey instrument). The first was the attack type and is very similar to the experiments reported in chapter 3. The attack type could take one of three forms: a drone strike, an air strike from a piloted aircraft, or the use of ground troops. Consistent with the casualty-aversion idea discussed above, the treatments had different information about the risk that American military personnel would face. The drone treatments stated that “the use of unmanned drones means that no American military personnel would be placed at risk.” The air strike treatments, in contrast, included information that the target of the strikes were believed to lack weapons capable of attacking aircraft, suggesting a low possibility of military casualties. The ground troops news stories did not mention if these troops faced any danger.

The second element that varied across the treatments was the purpose or goal of the use of force and is modeled after similar treatments used in other research on public opinion and foreign policy. The counterterrorism treatment described an al Qaeda branch operating in Yemen, with plans to place bombs on American airliners and in the mail. The proposed attack involving drones, air strikes, or ground forces would be directed at the al Qaeda bases with the primary goal of killing the organization’s leaders before they could launch an attack against the United States. Thus, the scenario closely parallels the kinds of targeted killing operations that have become common during the War on Terror.

The treatment for foreign policy restraint described Yemen threatening to attack oil tankers passing through the Persian Gulf using missiles launched from within Yemen. This would threaten American interests, as well as the global economy, by causing a dramatic increase in oil prices.
The story is therefore a case of one state acting aggressively, with costs that could lead respondents to sense that American national security was under threat. The proposed attack would be directed at the missile installations and would not have any larger objectives, such as degrading the military or replacing the government.

The internal political change treatment stated that a pro-American government in Yemen was in danger of being overthrown by a rebel group operating within the country. It said that the rebels had already defeated government military forces in several battles and that they were nearing the capital. The American intervention was being requested by the government and would attack the rebel leaders.

The humanitarian intervention treatment described Yemen’s military committing atrocities against ethnic minorities within the country. It said that the actions had been condemned by international human rights organizations and that those organizations were also calling on the United States to launch a military operation. This framed the intervention as being important on moral grounds. We were careful to not give respondents any indication that an intervention could benefit the United States or its allies or that it could lead to a protracted counterinsurgency operation. The prospective attack would only be launched against military bases housing the soldiers who were committing the atrocities, without any goals of occupying the country or reforming its government.

Combining these two elements—type and objective of military force—produces a total of twelve treatments. Roughly three hundred respondents were randomly assigned to read each of these stories. They then answered questions about their reactions to the planned use of force, including the degree to which they supported the attack, the importance of the policy objective, their estimates of the number of military casualties that would result, general attitudes regarding the wisdom of the use of force, and demographic questions such as party identification, age, gender, and so on. The experiment does not directly distinguish between support for military force (i.e., a desire to attack) and lack of opposition (i.e., an unwillingness to question the attack). However, distinguishing between levels of intensity for supporting a policy helps to address this issue by allowing those with intense feelings to strongly agree or disagree and those with weak feelings somewhat to agree or disagree as a way of signaling that they would not block the use of force.

As we pointed out in chapter 3, Yemen is a useful case for testing fic-
tional conflict scenarios because it is in the unique position of seeming like a plausible threat even though Americans are relatively ignorant of it. It is doubtful that Yemen would threaten US shipping in the Persian Gulf, or even that it would be able to do so. However, given Americans’ low level of knowledge about Yemen, it is unlikely that many respondents have any sense of the country’s military capacities or its interests when it comes to oil shipments. News coverage of the country identifies it as a terrorist sanctuary, but rarely comments on its military capacities or strategic goals.

It is more plausible that Iran would pose the kind of threat we describe, but identifying it as the target of our fictional strike would complicate our ability to draw conclusions about the influence of attack type and PPO on support for the use of force. Iran is a far more prominent security threat, especially given the ongoing controversy about its nuclear enrichment programs. It is also apt to raise partisan disagreements because of Democrats’ efforts to rebuild relations with the country and Republicans’ preference for reinstating the sanctions regime against its nuclear program. This means that although people who stay informed about Middle Eastern politics may see Yemen as a less realistic setting for some of the scenarios we describe, it is a better setting from a methodological perspective because it helps to avoid the difficulties that would come from a case with a higher profile or stronger connotations.

To this point, we have argued that military casualties are an important cost of conflict that influences attitudes regarding the use of force. As with the experiments in chapter 3, we expect respondents’ estimates of the number of military casualties will vary by attack type. Respondents should expect that the lowest number of military casualties will result from a drone strike, since these news stories make it explicit that military personnel will face no risk of physical harm. Treatments involving air strikes should lead to higher expectations of military casualties. Even though these conditions state that the target of the attack is not believed to have weapons capable of threatening military aircraft, respondents might still expect that the chance of military casualties could be higher. Respondents might worry that the target has, unknown to the United States, acquired anti-aircraft weapons, or that casualties could result if the aircraft were to malfunction over enemy territory. Respondents’ expectations of military casualties should be highest in the treatments that describe an attack by ground troops. Although these news stories make no mention of the risks that military personnel face in such situations, it should be straightforward
To assess how assignment to different treatments influenced estimates of military casualties, respondents were asked if they expected no military casualties, between 1 and 10 casualties, or between 11 and 100 casualties if the attack described in the news story they read were to be carried out. Figure 4.1 summarizes answers to this question. We see a pattern, consistent with our expectations and the findings in chapter 3, in which respondents assigned to the drone strike treatments expected the fewest casualties, followed by those assigned to air strike treatments and then the ground troop treatments. Importantly, differences across treatments for the same type of attack are small. This indicates that the information in the treatments influenced respondents’ expectations of military casualties in the same manner that we saw in chapter 3 and that this pattern holds across the different objectives of military action.

We next turn to assessing the influence of attack type and PPO on support for the use of force. The percentages of respondents in each treatment who selected each possible response to the question asking them to express their level of support for the attack are depicted in figure 4.2. A more systematic analysis is presented in table 4.2. Four models are reported in the table. Each uses the variable support for the attack as the dependent variable. The independent variables for each model include dichotomous
variables indicating assignment to an air strike or ground troops treatment. This means that the coefficients on these variables estimate how assignment to these treatments alters support for the use of force compared to respondents assigned to the drone strike treatment. The models also include gender, education, party identification, age, and minority status covariates and are estimated using ordered logistic regression.

Two patterns emerge from figure 4.2 and table 4.2. First, consistent with expectation 4.1, we see that drones strikes garner more support than do ground troops for each PPO. This means that the effect of drones on attitudes is not limited to counterterrorism operations; instead, the technology leads to more support for any military objective. Second, the data is consistent with expectation 4.2, as counterterrorism operations received greater approval, regardless of the type of force being used, than any of the other principal policy objectives. Even using ground forces in counterterrorism operations, which our respondents believed created a greater risk of harm, received more support than drone strikes or air strikes in support of any of the other PPOs. Taken together, these results demonstrate that respondents were more likely to risk soldiers’ lives in certain types of missions than others. In particular, there was a much higher risk tolerance when it came to counterterrorism operations than the other types of operations. This is evidence that the PPO has a strong influence on when the public will support drone strikes, or any other means of attack.

It is important to note that the pattern becomes more complicated beyond the “Strongly Approve” response, indicating that the lack of opposition shown by those with more mixed “Somewhat Approve” and “Somewhat Disapprove” responses is less consistent than the stronger feelings of support. Air strikes received lower levels of overall opposition than drones in internal political change and humanitarian intervention missions, while the levels were roughly equal for counterterrorism, and drones were less objectionable in foreign policy restraint. It is not clear why these differences exist, as they do not follow a clear pattern. It may reveal that those with weaker preferences about attack type are either less concerned about how military operations are carried out and more prone to inconsistent judgments because of their comparative disengagement. Whatever the explanation, the variation in the two intermediary levels of support does not track with the predicted casualties (i.e., there is less opposition to drones in foreign policy restraint operations even though respondents did not perceive these missions as being significantly more dangerous than the oth-
Fig. 4.2. Support by attack type and principal policy objective

TABLE 4.2. Ordered Logistic Regression Models of Attack Type by Principal Policy Objective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Counterterrorism</th>
<th>Humanitarian Intervention</th>
<th>Foreign Policy Restraint</th>
<th>Internal Political Change</th>
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<tr>
<td>Air strike</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>-.689***</td>
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<td>Air strike</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Policy Restraint</td>
<td>2,130</td>
<td>2,150</td>
<td>870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Political Change</td>
<td>1,999</td>
<td>2,019</td>
<td>854</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; * p < .1; ** p < .05; *** p < .01.
ers). From this we can at least conclude that the lack of opposition is probably not being influenced by casualty expectations.

To this point, we have found that attacks from drones receive more support than do attacks involving ground troops across different PPOs and that respondents are more willing to risk incurring casualties for counterterrorism objectives. But how large is this effect? Does the availability of drones sharply increase support for the use of force? Using the regression models from table 4.2, we calculated the predicted probability that a respondent would select each of the four levels of the dependent variable measuring her or his support for the attack carried out by a drone, holding all other variables constant for each PPO. We then repeated this exercise for respondents whose treatment assignments described the attack as being carried out by ground troops. Subtracting the latter value from the former provides an estimate of the difference in the predicted probability of each level of the dependent variable for respondents in the drone and ground troop treatments. Figure 4.3 graphs these changes for each PPO. For each PPO, respondents were more favorable to attacks by drones than by ground troops. However, there are noticeable differences in the size of these effects across PPOs. For the internal political change, foreign policy restraint, and humanitarian intervention treatments, reading about an attack by ground troops reduces the likelihood that a respondent will “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” with the decision to launch the attack by between 15 and 20 percent. The effect of an attack by ground troops compared to drone strikes was about half this size for respondents who read about a counterterrorism operation. In other words, while respondents in the counterterrorism group also preferred drone strikes to the use of ground troops, they were considerably more willing to endorse attacks with troops.

The chapter’s second expectation offers two reasons for the comparatively high levels of support for counterterrorism operations. First, terrorism has been the most prominent threat to national security since 9/11, with new terrorist plots being continually uncovered and governments around the world making a concerted effort to kill or capture suspected terrorists before they can strike. Even conventional military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have been framed as contributing to the Global War on Terror. The importance attached to counterterrorism operations probably had a profound influence on respondents’ conceptions of national security priorities.

Second, the counterterrorism scenario was the only one that involved
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an immediate threat to American national security. The fact that planes and the mail service would be used as the delivery vehicles for an attack would have been particularly threatening given terrorists’ previous use of these methods to carry out attacks within the United States. To determine if this is the case, we asked respondents the following question: “The United States faces many challenges today, at home as well as overseas. Among these challenges, how important do you think it is to address the problems discussed in the news story you read earlier?” Responses for each treatment are depicted in figure 4.4, where we see that considerably more respondents identified all of the counterterrorism objectives as very or somewhat important than they did for the remaining PPOs. Looking more closely at the patterns of coefficients in table 4.2, we see that respondents assigned to the counterterrorism and humanitarian intervention treatments offer as much support for the planned operation when it employs air strikes as when it uses drone strikes. This indicates that these respondents were

Fig. 4.3. Ground troop changes in predicted probabilities of supporting attack
willing to place air crews in some danger to achieve these objectives, but on average were less willing to do so when the objective involved internal political change or foreign policy restraint.

There was more overlap in the levels of support for the other types of operations. We did not see the large differences in support across the foreign policy restraint, humanitarian intervention, and internal political change treatments that one might expect from Jentleson and Britton’s work on PPOs. This may be due to the way we described the objectives. The internal political change mission was described in ways that made American intervention appear to be benevolent—an effort to help a beleaguered ally against rebels. Had the scenario described the rebels in favorable terms or

Fig. 4.4. Support for attack
provided some indication that the government being protected was corrupt or abusive, then we would probably have seen a significant drop in the levels of support.

Support for internal political change might also have been lower if the mission was to depose an existing government, as this might carry more risk of escalation and be seen as less politically defensible than efforts to protect a government against rebels. The possibility for variation here again highlights the importance of being attentive not only to the differences between PPOs but also to the various reasons why each PPO might be pursued. Even when focusing on a specific type of PPO, the perceived moral and legal legitimacy, as well as the perceived centrality of the mission to national security, could vary considerably.

Even though our results differ slightly from Jentleson and Britton’s findings, our experiments confirm those authors’ claim that the American public does calculate the costs and benefits of prospective policies. The degrees of support coincided with the severity of the threat to national security identified by the respondents in our experiment. The counter-terrorism scenario introduced a clear and plausible threat, while the next most popular intervention was directed at the less immediate, though still very serious, threat of economic disruption. The internal political change scenario did not describe any benefits to American security, yet the act of helping a foreign government did suggest that the United States might be looking out for its interests by building or strengthening relations with an ally. Finally, the humanitarian intervention not only failed to describe any benefits but also put the United States on the side of marginalized people who would have little to offer as allies.

The low approval for humanitarian interventions regardless of the weapons being used is evidence that casualty aversion is not the only obstacle preventing states from getting involved in these types of conflicts. The risk of sustaining casualties certainly plays some role in shaping support for humanitarian interventions, as evidenced by the lower levels of support for committing ground forces than drones or manned aircraft, yet it is clear that even relatively low-cost interventions are unpopular. This supports Jentleson and Britton’s contention that conflicts that are less essential to national security will generally receive less support and that the public will not favor military operations that seem unnecessary.

The pragmatic attitude toward wars is important for evaluating the consequences of casualty aversion discussed in chapter 3. It is revealing
that research on casualty aversion and criticisms of warfare tend to reach much different conclusions from their shared belief that citizens of contemporary democracies have a low tolerance for costly wars. Most critics of drones see casualty aversion as a positive development that discourages war and provides greater democratic accountability. By contrast, other commentators regret this phenomenon because it limits the United States’ capacities for deterring enemies and for launching attacks when necessary.28

The difference between these attitudes seems to be rooted in different conceptions of how and when the United States will wage wars. Those who are concerned about casualty aversion interfering with American foreign policy or who think it is not a serious barrier against fighting often seem to envision American wars as actions taken against unjust aggressors or as the military rescuing beleaguered populations during humanitarian interventions. By contrast, critics of drone warfare strongly imply that wars should be avoided and focus much of their attention on abuses of US military power. They are particularly sensitive to immoral, illegal, or politically inexpedient actions performed during the War on Terror.29

Future conflicts fought using drones will doubtless take many different moral valences. Some may be unjust, aggressive wars. Others may be benevolent or defensive. Most will probably be morally ambiguous conflicts the character of which will be continually debated, which seems to be the norm for most conflicts. There is rarely a consensus on when America’s wars are justified, even among just war theorists.30 The inevitability of different types of conflicts with divergent moral and legal implications suggests that pilot invulnerability will not be simply good or bad but that it may instead assist in achieving PPOs that differ in their moral character and political importance. Greater support for drones compared to other attack types may be desirable or undesirable depending on the circumstances of a particular conflict. The morality of drone warfare will rest heavily on how drones are used and when, which puts a great deal of responsibility on the elites who choose when to launch attacks. It also places responsibility on the public, which will have to make decisions about when to support the use of military force.

In practice, the shifts in public opinion of this magnitude are alone likely to decide whether a particular war is waged only under certain treatments. Decisions about initiating wars are not made directly by the American public but rather by elected officials whose decisions may be insulated from or unresponsive to citizens’ attitudes. Thus, public opinion
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will matter to the extent that changes in it can influence policymakers and alter their decisions. Voters may decide to punish policymakers who wage unpopular wars by removing them from office. However, it seems unlikely that any shifts in public opinion that could be caused by using drones instead of ground forces or piloted aircraft will have great influence on policymakers’ decisions if they are determined to go to war. A decision that increases opposition is probably unlikely to affect a policymaker’s election prospects, especially when it is weighed against other decisions that person has made.

The effect that drones have on support for war is likely to make them attractive weapons for politicians who are concerned with sustaining their popularity or who are not strongly committed to the use of force. The shift in public support that drones produce may not be enormous and may not be sufficient to change public opinion about a war, yet it is nevertheless just one of the many advantages that make drones attractive weapons. As Sauer and Schörnig correctly point out, there are multiple reasons for preferring drones over other weapons and tactics, such as their ability to loiter over targets and their comparatively low cost. Nevertheless, based on our experiment, it appears that the predictions about drones undermining democratic accountability are probably too strong. Because drones produce moderate increases in support for war, greater reliance on them will probably be unable to silence anti-war voices. This is evident from figure 4.2, which shows that roughly 20 to 40 percent of respondents did not want to launch drone operations despite the invulnerability of soldiers operating them. Such consistent opposition to military operations from that many respondents is evidence that politicians will continue to have strong incentives to pursue peaceful strategies of conflict resolution in an effort to satisfy those citizens.

Conclusion

This chapter takes a step toward building a more sophisticated understanding of how drone technology shapes support for war by exploring the influence of principal policy objectives. Accounting for the divergent levels of support across PPOs is useful when assessing what effects drones will have on support for future military operations and whether these weapons platforms will allow policymakers to escape some of the constraints
arising from casualty aversion. Furthermore, the differences between the support for different PPOs in our study compared to others shows that there is scope for variation within each PPO depending on what a specific operation aims to achieve. This all points to respondents making reasonably prudential judgments about prospective military ventures, granting or withdrawing support on a case-by-case basis.

Our results in this chapter indicate that attacks with drones receive more support than does the use of ground troops and, in some PPOs, air strikes. Choosing drones over these alternatives can offer enough of a boost in support to make drones popular for policymakers and to possibly even tip the balance of public opinion when there is a narrow divide between pro- and anti-war positions. But we also caution against overstating the effect of this finding. In many instances the added support that can be gained by choosing drones will not decide whether the country goes to war. Drones may therefore help to evade the effects of casualty aversion, but may not alone produce any serious changes to civic engagement or grant policymakers free rein over military affairs. Moreover, our results show that a substantial number of respondents oppose fighting regardless of whether the risks to soldiers can be eliminated. In the following chapter we will build another level onto this account of what drives support for drone strikes by looking more carefully at whether variations in the likelihood of mission success matter and whether there is a “moral hazard” of drones making it too easy to fight wars when the chance of victory is low.

Throughout this discussion we have also pointed to the issue of framing. Our experiments give respondents the information needed to assign prospective operations into a particular PPO, yet there is no guarantee that framing by media elites or policymakers will be accurate. There will always be a risk of a less popular mission type being misrepresented, such as foreign policy restraint being characterized as essential for counterterrorism. Given the effect of PPO on preferences for war, it is vital to be attentive to how conflicts are framed and to critically evaluate the case for fighting.

How elites frame a conflict, then, could influence the effect of drones on support for war. “Elite cues” approaches to public opinion hold that people generally respond to wars in ways that mirror their party affiliations: “partisan political actors, not ordinary citizens, balance costs and benefits when deciding to lend support to military action. The public may appear ‘rational,’ but only by following elites who share their basic political predilections.”34 This would mean that people generally do not
form their own opinions about when wars are justified. Rather, they simply adopt the views of elites, who are really the ones that make decisions about when to fight.

We have not sought to assess the role of elite cues here, but it is possible to draw several conclusions about the effect cuing has on support for drone strikes in particular. First, if Americans are responsive to elite cues and have fairly low competence for making their own decisions about when to support or oppose wars, then this is a problem that predates the widespread use of drones. Berinsky finds support for this theory in evidence gathered during the Second World War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the First Gulf War, as well as the early years of fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. These cases all predate drone warfare. Second, if public support for war is largely unaffected by casualty sensitivity or PPOs, then the general conclusions we have reached would still hold true. Drone warfare should not have a major influence on the incidence of war; casualty aversion would not be able to restrict policymakers’ war-making powers nor would it be reduced by the use of drones; and support for using drones would be highest when policymakers cue their supporters to take a particular threat seriously, as they have done by emphasizing the threat of terrorism.

The pattern that is evident in the levels of support for using drones, piloted aircraft, and ground forces shows that there is a continuum of support for military force that extends across the range of weapons and tactics that may be employed. One possibility for future research is to include a more diverse assessment of the weapons and tactics used by the US military to see how much this pattern is sustained. There may be gradations of support between the three types of attacks we explore. For example, support for the use of special operations forces could fall somewhere between support for an attack involving conventional ground forces and an air strike. Alternatively, it is possible that support for war could further diminish or increase as other weapons and tactics are introduced. The deployment of large numbers of soldiers to directly engage in combat could be less popular than the deployment of smaller numbers of soldiers serving in advisory roles. One could also argue that the PPO theory and casualty-aversion theories are incorrect, or at least that they are not the primary forces shaping attitudes toward wars.

Because drones have only been used on a large scale in counterterrorism operations, it can be difficult to separate their use in the War on Terror from the potential uses they might have in other types of conflicts. This
is reflected in the extensive literature on drone use discussed in chapter 1. Critics often condemn the use of drones to conduct targeted killings as though these were inherently linked; the circular logic uses the evidence of American military overreach in the War on Terror as evidence against drones and uses the proliferation of drones as evidence that the War on Terror is out of control and counterproductive. The concern that drones may lower the threshold for war is also closely associated with the War on Terror, as drones have facilitated attacks against suspected terrorists in Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia, attacks that might not have taken place if drones were not available.

It is impossible to predict how drones will be used in future conflicts, especially those involving PPOs other than counterterrorism. However, based on our experiments, it seems that the American public will probably support the use of drones in other types of operations, including attacks against state military forces. It is also likely that unless there is a marked shift in the kind of PPO that is seen as most necessary for the protection of national security, the government will not have quite as much freedom of action when deploying drones for reasons other than counterterrorism. While counterterrorism operations involving drones receive relatively high levels of support, the use of drones to attack foreign states or to strike rebel militias could create stronger opposition.